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### Perk of public office: discount furniture

Critics fault officials' exclusive deal with prisons

10:10 PM CST on Tuesday, February 7, 2006

By DAVE MICHAELS / The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN – When Sen. Eddie Lucio built his South Texas dream home in 2003, he chose an unusual place to shop for furniture: Texas prisons.

For the dining room, inmates fashioned a table with the state seal on it, 10 chairs and six bar stools. For a private chapel, they constructed four kneelers, 12 chairs, a holy water font and two altar chairs. Total cost: \$6,319.

"I liked the idea of getting things done handcrafted and by prisoners," said Mr. Lucio, a Democrat. "That is unique. It is a subject of conversation when people come visit me. I say, 'I ordered it from our own prisoners here.'"

Mr. Lucio is one of dozens of lawmakers to buy items over the last three years from Texas Correctional Industries, a division of the state prison system that manufactures, among other things, furniture, signs and clothing. It gives inmates a chance to develop a trade or skill and saves state agencies money because, with no labor costs, items sell for far less than those from private businesses.

And for lawmakers, buying the discounted goods is a perk of office.

Suzy Woodford, Texas director of Common Cause, a government watchdog group, said state lawmakers should have to pay market price if the items are for personal use and not available to all Texans.

"Allowing lawmakers to take advantage of not having to pay what they would pay at a retail store, and using it strictly for personal use, does not look good," Ms. Woodford said.

Rep. Tony Goolsby, a Dallas Republican who is close to Mr. Lucio, said there's nothing wrong with personal purchases. Mr. Goolsby has an \$1,100 replica of a historic desk from the Texas Capitol in his apartment in Austin.

"We're all born the same way, but we're not equal," he said. "Everybody gets perks."

State law allows Texas Correctional Industries to sell to the public, but a longstanding policy of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice limits personal sales to lawmakers, department employees and board members.

Mr. Lucio's order was the largest personal purchase in the last several years.

Many of his colleagues used campaign funds to buy items such as barbecue grills and bedroom furniture at prices far below retail.

Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands, had a bed frame, a dresser and a nightstand refinished in November for \$219. Mr. Williams did not return phone calls seeking comment.

Nate Crain, whose wife leads the criminal justice department's board, placed three orders together worth about \$1,000 from Texas Correctional Industries in 2004 and 2005. Mr. Crain, a former Dallas County Republican Party chairman who is exploring a run for the chairmanship of the statewide party, reported in campaign records that he bought items as gifts for his volunteers and a Republican women's group.

Board Chairman Christina Melton Crain said it was acceptable for her to order the items for her husband.

"I am allowed to order them and, as my spouse, he is allowed to pay for them," Ms. Crain said.

Mr. Crain said he didn't know whether the gifts, which included pillows and duffel bags, were more or less expensive than they would be at a retail store.

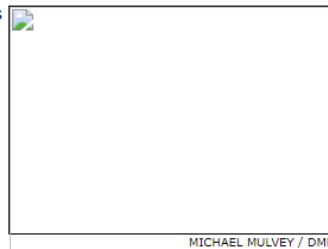
John Benestante, the director of Texas Correctional Industries, said his agency could refuse a sale to a sanctioned client only if it knew that the customer intended to resell the item. The decision to restrict public sales was made before he took over the division, Mr. Benestante said.

State employees and lawmakers accounted for 1 percent of his department's sales in 2005, according to agency figures.

Over the years, lawmakers have mostly used the service to outfit their statehouse offices or buy gifts such as gavels and flag-boxes for constituents. Chairmen of legislative committees often buy Texas Correctional Industries' decorative chairs and tables for their committee members.

Lawmakers often pay for those items with campaign funds.

In 2004, Rep. Burt Solomons, a Carrollton Republican, paid \$2,135 for five wet bars for his staff, according to his campaign finance report. They were emblazoned with the state seal.



MICHAEL MULVEY / DMN  
A Texas-shaped pit barbecue grill is one of the items for sale at the prison industries showroom.

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Mr. Solomons said the gift was to thank his staff for their hard work. He said it was allowable because he didn't order them for his own use.

"Let's say I had a restaurant and I bought five for my restaurant," he said. "That would be inappropriate."

Mr. Lucio paid for his furniture with personal funds, Mr. Lucio said. His purchase allowed inmates to practice their trade, he said.

"I paid with my own funds and never felt I was violating any rules," Mr. Lucio said. "If people want to change that, I can live with it."

For some lawmakers, the perk extends beyond their tenure. Some legislators have ordered items for their former colleagues, who can no longer order for themselves.

Rep. Mary Denny, who is retiring after this year, ordered a headboard and nightstand for former Rep. Jim Horn in 2004.

"If a legislator can buy it, anybody should be able to buy it," said Mr. Horn, who retired from representing his Denton district in 1999.

Rep. Vicki Truitt, a Southlake Republican, has purchased nine barbecue grills and smokers since 2003, according to state records. Texas Correctional Industries sold the smokers for \$155, and they fetched between \$900 and \$2,000 each in charity auctions for hospitals, Meals on Wheels and therapeutic centers, Ms. Truitt said.

Ms. Truitt bought smokers for her husband and sons-in-law, she said, paying with personal funds.

Ray Allen, a former legislator from Grand Prairie who resigned last month, had inmates build him a gun cabinet in 2003, state records show. Along with a table, the order cost \$2,089, records show.

And 15 days before he resigned, Mr. Allen ordered a 7-foot bench made of cherry wood for \$400.

Mr. Goolsby has been Texas Correctional Industries' best legislative customer for several years. He spent \$12,800 in 2004 and \$7,700 in 2005, according to state records. In 2004, he spent \$6,600 on flags and flag boxes, his favorite gift for constituents and supporters.

"People will display it and appreciate it," he said. "Someone is going to see it and maybe go vote for me. Everything an elected official does is to get re-elected."

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#### THE GOODS

Dallas-area representatives and senators have purchased various items from Texas Correctional Industries in 2005 and 2006:

**Rep. Ray Allen**, R-Grand Prairie: Custom benches, toy box, coffee table, walnut cuff-link boxes, Western-style end tables, gavels, tote bags. Total: \$3,150

**Sen. Kim Brimer**, R-Fort Worth: Park bench, custom sign, engraved state seal, sofa table, replica Senate desk. Total: \$2,900

**Rep. Betty Brown**, R-Terrell: Constitutional chairs. Total: \$654

**Sen. John Carona**, R-Dallas: Constitutional chairs. Total: \$872

**Sen. Robert Deuell**, R-Greenville: Leather office chairs. Total: \$818

**Rep. Charlie Geren**, R-Fort Worth: Flag boxes. Total: \$510

**Rep. Toby Goodman**, R-Arlington: Constitutional chairs. Total: \$436

**Rep. Tony Goolsby**, R-Dallas: Bowls, flags and flag boxes, constitutional chairs, replica of a House of Representatives desk, pillows, desk chairs, serving trays. Total: \$7,700

**Rep. Bob Griggs**, R-North Richland Hills: Gavels. Total: \$176

**Rep. Kent Grusendorf**, R-Arlington: Constitutional chairs, flag boxes, serving trays. Total: \$1,114

**Rep. Linda Harper-Brown**, R-Irving: Rocking chairs, flag boxes, bookends. Total: \$525

**Rep. Fred Hill**, R-Richardson: Glass cabinets, wooden bench. Total: \$2,305

**Rep. Jim Jackson**, R-Carrollton: Flag boxes. Total: \$123

**Rep. Jerry Madden**, R-Richardson: Keepsake boxes. Total: \$390

**Rep. Jim Pitts**, R-Waxahachie: Constitutional chairs. Total: \$1,574

**Rep. Todd Smith**, R-Euless: Constitutional chairs. Total: \$900

**Rep. Burt Solomons**, R-Carrollton: Barbecue grills, constitutional chairs, flag boxes, benches, bootjack. Total: \$5,139

**Rep. Vicki Truitt**, R-Southlake: Barbecue grills, smokers, constitutional chairs. Total: \$1,998

Note: Local lawmakers not listed made no purchases in 2005.

SOURCE: *Dallas Morning News* research

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